Clintonites' fear of global warming could mean soaring taxes on fuels

The Tampa Tribune (Florida)

November 10, 1996, Sunday,

METRO EDITION

Copyright 1996 The Tribune Co. Publishes The Tampa Tribune

Section: COMMENTARY,

Length: 864 words

Body

Americans have just re-elected the President who repeatedly promised to protect the environment, but it was seldom clear exactly what improvements he planned.

On controversies such as global warming, the details would be unpopular enough to give a campaign manager nightmares.

At an international meeting last summer, the Clinton administration agreed to the concept of mandatory cuts in the nation's emission of heat-trapping pollution. Scientists who believe the globe is growing warmer blame much of the problem on high emissions of carbon dioxide; to cut carbon dioxide emissions, they say, people must burn less fossil fuels.

Timothy Wirth, undersecretary of state for global affairs, is quite firm, if somewhat vague, about how he would force us to do that: "Saying that we want to have a target that is binding is a clear indication that the United States is very serious about taking steps and leading the rest of the world. We will be getting more and more specific."

Now that the election is safely over, we will soon learn more about the steps the President might take.

In June, a scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council wrote a letter to this newspaper that concluded: "The threat from global warming is real and it's time to do something about it." Like the President, he didn't say what.

But it isn't hard to speculate what would spur Americans to drive less, tolerate colder houses in winter and resist lowering the thermostat in summer: a big tax on oil and coal.

The American Petroleum Institute says the only way to get people to use significantly less fuel is to tax it or ration it. The tax on gasoline, according to some estimates, would need to be about 60 cents more a gallon to meet the administration's goals.

The international target also accepted by the United States is to reduce emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2000. That is an ambitious goal, considering that global emissions from fuel exhausts went up 12 percent from 1990 to 1995. The United States, the world's biggest polluter, sent 5 percent more carbon into the atmosphere in 1995 than it did five years earlier. To get back to 1990 levels will require more than a feel-good public relations campaign. It isn't unbelievable, as petroleum makers warn, that it would take a tripling of the federal gasoline tax to make drivers significantly reduce their weekly mileage and a sizable tax on coal to get Tampa Electric customers to use less electricity.

Clintonites' fear of global warming could mean soaring taxes on fuels

Whether taxpayers would stand for it and whether the economy could weather it are matters the President has so far avoided facing. You don't win elections saying things like, "If you think last winter was bad, just wait till I tax your oil and coal."

It is much easier to talk about what might happen if nothing is done. The Earth's atmosphere acts like a greenhouse in trapping some of the sun's heat. So-called greenhouse gases hold the heat in. The substance of most concern is carbon because during the past century, the level of atmospheric carbon dioxide has increased 50 percent. This is believed to have something to do with a slight increase in average temperatures that some scientists have noticed.

With human activities adding 3.5 billion tons of carbon a year to the 700 billion tons already in the air, the long-range forecast is for temperatures to creep upward. Scientists disagree about the extent of the problem and the timing, but as Wirth said last summer, "There is now overwhelming agreement in the scientific community that as carbon goes up, we can see temperatures starting to go up."

Journalists have had a field day getting experts and environmentalists to speculate on the calamities an increase of 2 to 4 degrees would bring over the next century: rising seas, coastal flooding, crop failures, monster storms, droughts and a rampage of tropical diseases.

They have been less aggressive asking exactly how consumers will be persuaded to consume less energy. Asked about economic impacts of reducing fossil fuel use, Wirth didn't offer suggestions but said, "In a world of change, everybody doesn't remain advantaged."

When pressed, politicians tend to dismiss the problem or mention painless remedies such as increased energy efficiency. It is not encouraging to note that as the fuel economy of automobiles increased greatly from 1969 to 1990, U.S. drivers drove 50 percent more miles in 1990 and burned even more fuel.

There are many questions to be answered before the United States taxes its use of fuel and slows down the economy. What happens to nations that refuse to follow our example and thus enjoy a competitive advantage in manufacturing? Should Americans tax themselves to allow the globe to absorb more safely the added pollution from new factories in developing nations? Will gasoline become a black-market item the way liquor was during Prohibition?

Should we expect China and the Pacific Rim countries to choke back their smoking economies before they achieve the automakers' dream of the universal Oriental two-car family? Should we drive less so they can drive more?

President Clinton should address the nation soon to explain in precisely what ways he wants U.S. citizens to cease to be advantaged.

Notes

EDITORIALS

Load-Date: November 11, 1996

End of Document